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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0589
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RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
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DEPT FOR SES-O
DEPT FOR SCA/PB, SCA/EX
DCHA/OFDA FOR ROBERT THAYER
AID/W FOR AA MARK WARD AND ANE ANNE DIX
DCHA/FFP FOR MATTHEW NIMS AND PAUL NOVICK
ROME FOR FODAG
BANGKOK FOR RDM/A TOM DOLAN, ROB BARTON
KATHMANDU FOR USAID OFDA BILL BERGER AND SUE MCINTYRE
TREASURY FOR ELIZABETH WEISS AND SUSAN CHUN

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: USAID/OFDA Cyclone Sidr Situation Report #5: USAID/DART
Field Report and Initial Humanitarian Assessments

¶1. Summary. Tropical Cyclone Sidr made landfall in southern Bangladesh on November 15, 2007, leading to 3,061 deaths, affecting more than 6.8 million people, and damaging more than 1.2 million homes, according to the Government of Bangladesh's (GOB) Disaster Management Bureau and the U.N. World Food Program (WFP) as of November 25. In response, USAID deployed a Disaster Assistance Response Team (USAID/DART) to assess the humanitarian situation on the ground, provide recommendations on priority needs, and assist with U.S. Government (USG) relief efforts. From November 21 to 25, the USAID/DART and others conducted an initial field assessment of affected areas, traveling to Barisal, Patharghata, Patuakhali, and Bagerhat towns, as well as coastal villages south and southeast of Barguna town. Communities residing in areas south of Barguna face the most critical challenges due to the impact of the cyclone, including the highest number of casualties, destroyed homes, and the loss of livestock, crops, and household assets. The USAID/DART identified priority needs in emergency food aid, water, sanitation, and hygiene, emergency relief commodities, and shelter. In the coming days, the USAID/DART will continue conducting in-depth assessments to evaluate humanitarian needs and target possible gaps in services where USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) could provide additional support. End Summary.

USAID/DART TRAVELS TO CYCLONE-AFFECTED AREAS

¶2. On November 21, members from the USAID/DART departed Dhaka for

Barisal town in southern Bangladesh. The USAID/DART participated in an interagency assessment mission of cyclone-affected areas in conjunction with the Humanitarian Assistance Survey Team (HAST), the Army Medical Corps, U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), and USAID/Bangladesh. On November 22, the joint team accompanied implementing partner Save the Children to Patharghata town to witness a distribution of emergency relief commodities. On November 23, some members of the assessment team traveled with non-governmental organization (NGO) partner World Vision to Bagerhat town, Khulna Division. Other members met with NGO partner CARE in Barguna town.

¶3. On November 24, the U.S. military teams remained in Barisal and Patuakhali for additional assessments, while the USAID/DART and USAID/Bangladesh traveled by boat to cyclone-affected areas south and southeast of Barguna town. In Nayabhunguni village, Chotobaisdia Union, the USAID/DART reported that heavy rains and storm surge led to the destruction of 22 homes located between high and low banks along the riverbed. Most displaced families are currently living with neighbors. In this village, the provision of food aid, shelter, and medical care are humanitarian priorities, according to the USAID/DART. The team also visited Charagangga village, Borobaisdia Union, where the impact of the cyclone destroyed approximately 300 homes. Here, the USAID/DART identified emergency needs in repairing dam walls along rivers, providing shelter, and constructing cyclone centers. Subsequently, the USAID/DART visited Taktabunia village, Moudubi village, and Alipur town along the southern coast of Barguna District. The interagency assessment team returned to Dhaka on November 25.

USAID/DART OBSERVATIONS

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¶4. The USAID/DART reported that current statistics on affected populations are not consistent. Ongoing, detailed assessments from implementing partners will better inform these numbers. USAID/OFDA can expect initial results from these humanitarian assessments in the coming days.

¶5. In areas north and northeast of Barguna town, the USAID/DART witnessed "pockets of destruction" caused by wind and storm surge. In areas south of Barguna town, destruction is more widespread, marked by damaged homes, agricultural fields, fisheries, and loss of livestock. In addition, most fatalities due to the cyclone occurred in these southern areas. The USAID/DART described areas south of Barguna town as the most cyclone-affected. However, if the cyclone had occurred during high tide, given the 8 to 10 foot tidal change, storm surge and resultant flooding could have killed tens of thousands of additional people.

¶6. The USAID/DART reported adequate road access to most areas on the mainland. Due to a GOB policy allowing residents to harvest fallen trees free of charge, the roads were quickly cleared of debris and collapsed trees caused by the cyclone. WFP in Dhaka also reported that main road access to most affected areas is now available, though slow and arduous. The main challenge remains the "final mile," as described by the GOB and relief agencies, in reaching beneficiaries. However, the USAID/DART indicated that several remote islands and some coastal areas remain accessible only by boat. The U.S. military is investigating appropriate areas for marine and air access to support USG relief efforts. In Barguna District, the Bangladesh navy facilitates emergency relief activities through Patharghata, Talibana, and Ashar Char ports.

¶7. In Helbonia village, Dhalua Union, the USAID/DART encountered a settlement of 800 to 1,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) along the road. Although the USAID/DART observed the presence of GOB food rations at the site of displacement, many of the IDPs reportedly had not received food assistance. The USAID/DART also noted that displaced households had constructed shelter out of mats rather than plastic sheeting and other emergency supplies, suggesting that these IDPs had moved to higher ground as a standard coping mechanism for annual flooding.

USAID/DART RECOMMENDATIONS

¶8. According to the USAID/DART, Save the Children and World Vision are the most operational NGOs in the highly-affected areas. Even though CARE has food capacity in the country, it needs logistical support to move emergency food commodities into affected areas. The USAID/DART recommends and supports CARE's efforts to use U.S. military transport.

¶9. The USAID/DART reported that emergency food aid is the highest priority for humanitarian assistance in response to the cyclone. In the most affected areas, household reserves of food have been depleted or destroyed. Food distributions will assist affected populations in the short-term. Ongoing assessments will provide information on medium to long-term needs. In addition, the USAID/DART questioned the actual percentage of crops destroyed by the cyclone, as reports from the GOB and aid agencies fluctuate from

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30 to 90 percent total crop loss. If the percentage of crop loss is indeed high, affected communities may experience food insecurity and will need agricultural and livelihoods assistance in the medium term.

¶10. The USAID/DART reported that the second humanitarian priority is water, sanitation, and hygiene. [Note. The Bangladesh military has identified water, sanitation, and hygiene as the first priority humanitarian need, while health care constitutes the second priority. End note.] The Bangladesh military and NGOs express the necessity of deploying water purification units in southern coastal areas, particularly where water sources are saline. The USAID/DART supports this intervention in areas where high salinity levels or destroyed water, sanitation, and hygiene infrastructure have created unprotected water sources. Further assessments will inform the potential need for deployment of water purification units. The USAID/DART recommends immediately disinfecting existing water sources that are contaminated, increased preparedness for disease outbreaks, and continual hygiene promotion regarding safe drinking water and hand washing. Ongoing assessments will provide more detailed information on medium to long-term interventions in water, sanitation, and hygiene.

¶11. The USAID/DART identified emergency relief commodities as the third priority need, including water containers, blankets, winter clothing, soap, and cooking utensils. Most household assets were swept away by the storm surge, particularly in the most affected areas south of Barguna town and along waterways.

¶12. The USAID/DART identified shelter as an additional priority need. While the team witnessed widespread damage to homes in highly affected areas south of Barguna town, damage to shelter existed mostly in pocketed areas north of Barguna. More detailed analysis is forthcoming following ongoing humanitarian assessments. The USAID/DART reported that immediate shelter needs include the distribution of corrugated iron sheeting, as affected communities have already begun rebuilding homes by salvaging materials. Medium-term shelter interventions will involve disaster risk reduction activities, such as constructing elevated, structurally-sound shelters.

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